

# **JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE**

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Edited by  
Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN  
ASIAN STUDIES



# JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

Critical Concepts in  
Asian Studies

*Edited by*  
*Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto*

**Volume IV**  
**Globalizing Japanese Popular Culture:**  
**The Coolness of Japan?**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Japanese popular culture : critical concepts in Asian studies / edited by Matthew Allen and  
Rumi Sakamoto.

volumes cm

“Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada”–Title page verso.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: Volume 1. Japanese popular culture in the twentieth century –

Volume 2–3. Japanese popular culture in the twenty-first century –

Volume 4. Globalizing Japanese popular culture : the coolness of Japan?

ISBN 978-0-415-82789-8 (set) – ISBN 978-0-415-83269-4 (volume 1) –

ISBN 978-0-415-83270-0 (volume 2) – ISBN 978-0-415-83271-7 (volume 3) –

ISBN 978-0-415-83272-4 (volume 4) 1. Popular culture–Japan–History–20th century.

2. Popular culture–Japan–History–21st century. 3. Japan–Civilization–1945–

4. Japan–Intellectual life. 5. Japan–Social life and customs. 6. Civilization,  
Modern–Japanese influences. I. Allen, Matthew, 1957– II. Sakamoto, Rumi.

DS822.5.J447 2014

306.0952–dc23

2013049220

ISBN: 978-0-415-82789-8 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-83272-4 (Volume IV)

Typeset in 10/12pt Times NR MT  
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

#### **Publisher's Note**

References within each chapter are as they appear in the original complete work.



Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reprint their material:

*Foreign Policy* for permission to reprint Douglas McGray, 'Japan's Gross National Cool', *Foreign Policy*, May/June, 2002, 44–54.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint Koichi Iwabuchi, '"Soft" Nationalism and Narcissism: Japanese Popular Culture Goes Global', *Asian Studies Review*, 26, 4, 2002, 447–469.

John Wiley & Sons for permission to reprint Yoshitaka Mōri, 'The Pitfall Facing the Cool Japan Project: The Transnational Development of the Anime Industry Under the Condition of Post-Fordism', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 20, 2011, 30–42.

John Wiley & Sons for permission to reprint Laura Miller, 'Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 20, 2011, 18–29.

Springer for permission to reprint Peng Er Lam, 'Japan's Quest for "Soft Power": Attraction and Limitation', *East Asia*, 24, 2007, 349–363.

Oxford University Press for permission to reprint Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, 'Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8, 2008, 73–101.

Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint Christine R. Yano, 'Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as it Grabs the Global Headlines', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 68, 2009, 681–688.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint Anne Allison, 'Portable Monsters and Commodity Cuteness: *Pokémon* as Japan's New Global Power', *Postcolonial Studies*, 6, 3, 2003, 381–395.

Oxford University Press for permission to reprint Andrew C. McKevitt, '"You Are Not Alone!": Anime and the Globalizing of America', *Diplomatic History*, 34, 5, 2010, 893–921.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint William Howard Kelly, 'Karaoke's Coming Home: Japan's Empty Orchestras in the United Kingdom', *Leisure Studies*, 30, 3, 2011, 309–331.

Sage Publications for permission to reprint Gabriella Lukacs, 'Iron Chef around the World: Japanese Food Television, Soft Power, and Cultural Globalization', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13, 4, 2010, 409–426.

Sage Publications for permission to reprint Mia Consalvo, 'Console Video Games and Global Corporations: Creating a Hybrid Culture', *New Media & Society*, 8, 2006, 117–137.

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Sage Publications for permission to reprint Hye-Kyung Lee, 'Between Fan Culture and Copyright Infringement: Manga Scanlation', *Media, Culture & Society*, 31, 6, 2009, 1011–1022.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint Luis Pérez González, 'Fansubbing Anime: Insights into the "Butterfly Effect" of Globalisation on Audiovisual Translation', *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 14, 4, 2006, 260–277.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint Larissa Hjorth, 'Odours of Mobility: Mobile Phones and Japanese Cute Culture in the Asia-Pacific', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 26, 1–2, 2005, 39–55.

The University of Texas Press for permission to reprint Benjamin Wai-ming Ng, 'Japanese Popular Music in Singapore and the Hybridization of Asian Music', *Asian Music*, 34, 1, 2003, 1–18.

The University of Hawaii Press for permission to reprint Hyunjoon Shin, 'Reconsidering Transnational Cultural Flows of Popular Music in East Asia: Transbordering Musicians in Japan and Korea Searching for "Asia"', *Korean Studies*, 33, 2009, 101–123.

Taylor & Francis for permission to reprint Yuen Shu Min, 'Kusanagi Tsuyoshi x Chonangang: Transcending Japanese/Korean Ethnic Boundaries in Japanese Popular Culture', *Asian Studies Review*, 35, 1, 2011, 1–20.

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The publishers have made every effort to contact authors/copyright holders of works reprinted in *Japanese Popular Culture (Critical Concepts in Asian Studies)*. This has not been possible in every case, however, and we would welcome correspondence from those individuals/companies whom we have been unable to trace.

# INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME IV: HOW COOL IS JAPAN?

The rising interest in Japanese popular culture in recent years is largely a result of its ubiquitous presence outside Japan. The visibility of Japanese popular culture is undeniable in the US, Europe and Asia today: *manga*, *anime*, *karaoke* and a number of other popular cultural phenomena have a high-profile presence globally. The essays in this volume represent scholarly efforts to understand this relatively new phenomenon.

We have organised this volume into three parts. Part 1 consists of works that address Japan's 'soft power' thesis and 'Cool Japan' ideology. In the 1990s, at the time of Japan's economic recession, Japanese popular cultural exports increased. One of the earliest pieces that captured this phenomenon was Douglas McGray's essay, which originally appeared in *Foreign Policy* and coined the term 'Japan's gross national cool'. This essay, which is the first in this volume (Chapter 70), marked the beginning of the 'Cool Japan' discourse, as it was picked up by the Japanese government in its effort to consciously promote cultural diplomacy and soft power via popular cultural exports. Despite the frequently optimistic and self-congratulatory Japanese discourse on Cool Japan, scholars have generally been sceptical about the state strategy, as the essays gathered here attest. Iwabuchi (Chapter 71) argues that Japan's discourse of soft nationalism is narcissistic and discounts the complicated nature of transnational cultural flows, as it assumes the 'uniquely Japanese' nature of Japanese popular culture. He cautions against reading the global presence of Japanese popular culture as the sign of Japanese cultural hegemony. What is happening, he suggests, is 'decentring', where origins do not matter much and culturally odourless products circulate transnationally. Globalisation of Japanese popular culture is characterised by 'transnationalist ambivalence' as culture gets hybridised, indigenised, appropriated and so on, thus undermining the state desire to 'nationalise' cultural flow. Mōri's essay (Chapter 72) similarly challenges the Japaneseness of globalising Japanese popular culture via the examination of the transnational production of the animation industry in Japan, China and Korea, over the period since the 1960s. Laura Miller offers an important feminist critique of

Cool Japan ideology (Chapter 73). She points out that Cool Japan ideology is a gendered one that objectifies femininity, narrowly centring on cuteness, and that its emphasis on male *otaku* culture excludes girls' creativity and innovations. She further reminds us that the global embrace of 'cuteness' is also tied to the structure of gender inequality, as it permits the enjoyment of sexist representations, which is a product of male desire and fantasies.

The next set of essays is concerned with the presence and meaning of Japanese pop culture in countries Japan invaded and/or colonised in the past. Lam argues (Chapter 74) that despite the attractiveness of Japanese popular culture and the Japanese government's cultural diplomacy effort, Japan's 'image problem' will continue because of the longstanding historical issues in East Asia. Otmazgin's study of the Japanese popular culture industries in East Asia shows how they shape local markets and disseminate new images of Japan (Chapter 75). While noting that consumption is more complicated than production and distribution, he does suggest that young people in East Asia are developing a new sympathetic perception of Japan and that the shared experience of popular culture may promote a dialogue between Japanese and other East Asian people. One example of such a possibility is captured in 'Healing old wounds with manga diplomacy', an interview with Ishikawa Yoshimi (Chapter 76). Ishikawa, after some initial difficulties, organised a successful exhibition of Japanese *manga* artists' experience of the war at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall ('My August 15', 2009–10). His chronicle of this exhibition lets us glimpse a possibility of different aspects of on-the-ground soft power, despite multiple problems with the discourse of 'soft power' as narcissism, nationalism, anti-feminism and so on.

Overall, while the possibility of popular cultural 'diplomacy' is not totally rejected, scholars have stressed the spontaneous transnational and fluid movements of culture that often escape the state's control. Globalisation of culture involves multiple levels, agencies and practices, and is contingent on local contexts and interpretation/articulation. Of central importance to the study of globalising Japanese popular culture, therefore, are empirical studies that closely look at the specific workings of such complex cultural flows. The rest of this volume provides closer examination of specific interactions, first in the West, then in Asia.

In the 'West' section (Part 2.1), Yano and Allison look at two of the global icons of Japanese cuteness, *Hello Kitty* (Yano) and *Pokémon* (Allison). Yano (Chapter 77) focuses on the global popularity of *Hello Kitty* and Japanese cuteness. While she recognises its link with infantilised, sexualised and 'born out of passivity' Japanese femininity, her focus is in Kitty's 'subversive playfulness'. For Yano, Kitty is a benign but powerful symbol of new Japan, an icon of playful sexuality, a logo, and it can even be an open canvas for hyperviolence. And, ultimately, it is a profitable corporate strategy of Sanrio. Allison (Chapter 78), also emphasising the 'commodity' aspect of *Pokémon*, argues that *Pokémon*'s success overseas has to do with its 'commodity cuteness'

– that is, marketing and packaging of Japan cuteness in a ‘hyper-consumerist’ (digital, portable and multi-media) form. And Japaneseness matters here, as *Pokémon*’s marketing strategy involved conscious imprinting of Japaneseness.

The next four essays examine specific instances of Japanese popular culture in North America and the UK: *anime* in America (McKevitt, Chapter 79), *karaoke* in the UK (Kelly, Chapter 80), *Iron Chef*, a TV programme, in North America (Lukacs, Chapter 81) and the computer games industry in the US (Consalvo, Chapter 82). Collectively they challenge the model of unidirectional cultural transmission from the West and the rest that reflects the hierarchical relations between the two, and reveal the complexity of the concrete process of hybridisation, globalisation and cross-national development of content, style and meaning production around ‘Japanese’ popular culture. They imply that the ubiquitous presence of Japanese popular culture globally may not be about Japan’s power, and that we may need to look at how Japanese popular culture is interacting and intersecting with local industry and consumers. Amy Shirong Lu (Chapter 83) analyses how racial characteristics of *anime* characters are perceived by global audiences, and discovers that characters that are intended to be ‘Asian’ characters are often seen as ‘Caucasian’ by Caucasian audiences (mostly from the USA). She suggests that part of the reason for the success of Japanese animation may be because of this relative ‘odourlessness’.

The next three essays are concerned with fan activities. Hye-Kyung Lee (Chapter 84) looks at fan culture and informal distribution networks surrounding *manga* scanlation and points out the conflict between globalisation and nationally focused law, while Luis Pérez González (Chapter 85) looks at the issue of fansubbing from the perspective of translation studies. With the proliferation of the internet such fan activities are becoming increasingly relevant to the global popularity of Japanese popular culture.

The rest of the essays concern Japanese popular culture in Asia (Part 2.2). In a variety of ways, they, too, examine the localisation, appropriation, transformation and hybridisation of Japanese popular culture. While the historical power hierarchy between Japan and other nations in Asia provides a context for these studies, what emerges is far from a simplistic thesis of Japanese cultural imperialism or colonialism.

Hjorth (Chapter 86) looks at ‘cute customisation’ as a means of personalising and humanising technology in Asia and argues that there is not just a single version of Japanese cuteness, but many forms, thus adding to Allison and Yano’s essays on cuteness. Dong-Hoo Lee (Chapter 87) looks at how young Korean women have appropriated Japanese TV dramas to fit them to their own needs of negotiating gender norms and identities in Korea. Ng’s essay on J-pop in Singapore (Chapter 88) demonstrates that the J-pop boom in Singapore was a result of multiple elements, including the role of Hong Kong and Taiwan as the largest redistribution centres of J-pop in Asia, piracy, television, radio, as well as electronic and print media. Therefore, he argues,

## INTRODUCTION

it would be too simplistic to see Japanisation and hybridisation of Singaporean music culture purely as a form of cultural colonialism. Rather, it should be understood as a part of transnational cultural flows of Asian music. Hyunjoon Shin also calls for the framework of 'trans-Asia cultural traffic' within the Asian region in place of a West/non-West framework (Chapter 89). By examining the interactions between two 'transbordering' migrant musicians in Japan and Korea, her essay argues that postcolonial power relations between Japan and Korea are complex, and draws our attention to the formation of new imaginations of Asia beyond national boundaries. Shu Min Yuen (Chapter 90) looks at Kusanagi Tsuyoshi, a member of Japanese boy band SMAP, and his Korean alter ego, Chonangang, and argues that he has challenged essentialist understanding of ethnic identity by mixing both Japaneseness and Koreanness in his performances. Kusanagi/Chonangang transcends national and cultural borders between Japan and Korea and has had a positive impact on Japan–Korea relations.